Chomsky’s Golden Rule:
Comparison and Cosmopolitanism
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Noam Chomsky, arguably the most cosmopolitan of American intellectuals, is also a conspicuous practitioner of comparison. This is natural enough, for comparison is often associated with cosmopolitanism and indeed is sometimes taken as its signature operation. For some critics, this is a decisive argument against both. In demanding an ever-increasing inclusiveness, cosmopolitanism is held to produce the illusory spectacle of the-world-as-a-whole. This spectacle was and is a product of imperialist violence, so the argument goes, and that violence is repeated in the everyday act of comparison. Comparison presupposes common norms; common norms, which by definition impose sameness on difference, presuppose a view from outside or above; the view from outside or above presupposes that the viewer is a holder of power. Thus both comparison and cosmopolitanism can be assimilated to capitalist globalization, which is understood to rule by reducing difference to homogeneity.¹

It is no surprise to find this line of argument popular within literary studies, where it of course repeats the discipline’s self-defining reverence for the unique, the particular, and the incomparable while making it seem that the discipline itself is anti-imperialist by its very nature. By the same token, however, there is a certain interest in following out the relations between cosmopolitanism and comparison in Chomsky, who is second to none (not even the literary left) in his denunciations of imperialism, yet who could not be less “literary” either in his writing or in his philosophical premises. That is the task of the present essay.

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“The average life expectancy of a species,” Noam Chomsky writes on the first page of his book Hegemony or Survival, “is about 100,000 years.” With the help of evolutionary biology, which routinely counts in units of hundreds of thousands of years, Chomsky sets himself up to take a very long view of “America’s quest for global dominance”– that’s the book’s subtitle– and of everything else.² One page later, as if the biologist’s perspective were not distant enough, Chomsky evokes humanity’s capacity for self-destruction by adopting an even more distant

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viewpoint: that of “a hypothetical extraterrestrial observer” (2).

It does not seem accidental that Chomsky should appeal in this way to a “hypothetical extraterrestrial observer.” In a sense, the extraterrestrial observer is his tutelary spirit. Chomsky has arguably become the most famous and most cosmopolitan public intellectual in the U.S in large part because his viewpoint so successfully mimics that of a visitor to Earth from outer space. When we read him, whether we are Americans or not, we feel at least momentarily as if we ourselves were aliens, spectators looking down from a great height on the bad behavior of our fellow earthlings. This alienness gives a distinctive kind of rhetorical pleasure, and it has a distinctive kind of political force. The pleasure and the force come together to define Chomsky’s distinctive version of cosmopolitanism, which allows readers not only to take a giant step backward from the U.S.’s assumptions about the essential rightness of its habitual ways of thinking, but also to enjoy the experience. I insist on the enjoyment because cosmopolitanism is so often represented as aridly intellectual, abstract and detached, empty of such potentially compromising creaturely delights. And I insist on the rhetoric because as I will propose, it is his rhetoric that allows us to see where, politically speaking, Chomsky belongs.

It needs to be stressed that the hypothetical extraterrestrial observer is indeed a rhetorical figure. Such figures are not easy to spot in Chomsky. His writing is unusually bare of metaphor, wordplay, tonal variety. If he has a rhetorical signature, it is perhaps the refusal of any and all rhetorical eccentricity or creativity. He seems to compose as if expecting at any minute to be stopped in order to be translated, and as if any stylistic embellishment on his part could only be expected to get in the way of that process. Both expectations are entirely reasonable. As Franco Moretti has noted, the narrator’s voice is the element of literary structure that is most anchored in
its locality. As opposed to plots and character types, which are readily borrowed, voice has much more trouble crossing national and linguistic borders. Chomsky’s prose, on the other hand, is remarkably efficient at crossing borders. *Hegemony or Survival* has already been translated into 46 languages. In this sense too, Chomsky must be considered a cosmopolitan. By offering a minimum of resistance to translation, his prose makes a visible effort to approach as closely as possible to extraterrestrial universality, to be as little marked as possible by the accidents of his birth in a particular nation and his being raised in a particular language.

If Chomsky is trying to be transparent and universal, it follows that in attributing rhetoric to him, I will appear to be arguing with him—arguing at least with his implicit claim to be a universalist or cosmopolitan in the strongest sense. Rhetoric, as I understand it, is an inevitable sign of partiality or belonging. To be shown to be using rhetoric undercuts the cosmopolitan’s claim to exist in a state of pure extraterrestriality or detachment. This argument does not count as a crippling critique, however, if one believes, as I do, that there is no such thing as cosmopolitanism in the strongest sense— that all cosmopolitanism involves some mode or degree of belonging, however minimal or reluctant. But if the critique is not damning, neither is it trivial. If no cosmopolitanism is pure, this doesn’t mean that all cosmopolitanisms are equal. My purpose here is the delicate one of beginning to distinguish among unequal cosmopolitanisms, searching for significant differences in their ways of inhabiting the paradoxical condition of detachment and belonging, and ways of judging those differences.

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Rhetorically speaking, the key component in Chomsky’s cosmopolitan voice is the act of comparing, or more precisely an unrestricted, uninhibited practice of comparing. Chomsky
draws comparisons without concern for anyone’s tender sensibilities, especially not those of his compatriots. To make one’s country and countrymen freely available for comparison seems to be, for him, the fundamental moral gesture. Though the following is as he says a “moral truism,” it is nonetheless a useful one: “the standards we apply to others we must apply to ourselves” (605). The slogan sounds a lot like the Golden Rule, and that is no doubt one reason why it travels so well. At any rate, Chomsky has gotten a lot of mileage out of it. Consider how often he makes the same exact move in his comments in January 2009 about the Israeli invasion of Gaza which was then in process and the heavy civilian casualties it was inflicting. When an Israeli journalist speaks of “the price the inhabitants [of Gaza] will have to pay” in order for Israel to achieve order and security, Chomsky sarcastically inserts the statement into an unpleasant series of analogies: “The problem has been familiar to Americans in South Vietnam, Russians in Afghanistan, Germans in occupied Europe, and other aggressors.” (Sarcasm is one rhetorical mode that, perhaps because it is relatively unambiguous, seems to translate pretty well.) Again: “Times columnist Thomas Friedman explained that Israel's tactics both in the current attack and in its invasion of Lebanon in 2006 are based on the sound principle of ‘trying to “educate” Hamas, by inflicting a heavy death toll on Hamas militants and heavy pain on the Gaza population.’ That makes sense on pragmatic grounds,” Chomsky notes drily. “And by similar logic, bin Laden's effort to ‘educate’ Americans on 9/11 was highly praiseworthy, as were the Nazi attacks on Lidice and Oradour, Putin's destruction of Grozny, and other notable attempts at ‘education.’” That which we criticize in others we must also remember to criticize in ourselves and our allies. If we disapprove of the attacks of 9/11 or the Nazi massacre of civilians in retaliation for acts of resistance, we must also disapprove of the Israeli devastation of
Gaza. We cannot assume that the US and its most reliable ally are somehow magically protected from the judgments that are routinely brought to bear upon non-allies—Russia bombing the population of Grozny, al-Qaeda flying planes into the World Trade Center, or whatever.

Thomas Friedman is an easy target, yet he takes for granted nothing more than what most of us take for granted most of the time: that it is as natural and normal to root for our country as to root for our team, that where national belonging is concerned, it is natural and normal to apply a double standard. It’s this simple, shockingly pervasive assumption that Chomsky quietly withdraws. And with that foundational premise gone, various ideological edifices crumble. Comparison liberated from this premise—an unshackled, free-range comparison that almost looks like a different species from the domesticated variety we thought we knew—is the hero of Chomsky’s cosmopolitanism.

Following his vigorous version of the Golden Rule, Chomsky specializes in asking whether the United States has done unto others what it would like done unto it. He compares the actions of the United States with the actions of other countries, especially those of whom the US government and media express their strongest disapproval, so as to make the point that the US itself has been either as bad or worse. For example: “the US itself is a leading terrorist state.” Or: “The US, in fact, is one of the most extreme religious fundamentalist cultures in the world” (21). Apropos of the US “drug war” in Colombia, he writes: “Imagine the reaction to a proposal that Colombia or China should undertake fumigation programs in North Carolina to destroy government-subsidized crops used for more lethal products” (60-1). Bush’s policy of “anticipatory self-defense” in Iraq resembled the Japanese policy at Pearl Harbor (12). And so on. These are all great lines. One would like to see more students trained to feel their force and

Comment [r1]: Could you explain what you are thinking of here? Comment rather cryptic. TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT. I LIKE IT AS IT IS.
sent out into the world prepared to deliver lines like them. Hearing calls to boycott the Beijing Olympics last summer in the name of Tibet, I naturally asked myself what Chomsky would say. Why didn’t the US media see fit to add, I thought, that if the Olympics had been happening in an American city, the war in Iraq would offer much stronger moral grounds than Tibet for Americans to boycott a U.S.-based Olympics?

Chomsky clearly goes well beyond the now customary celebrations of cosmopolitanism-as-diversity. If some of the celebrants have forgotten to ask whether cosmopolitanism helps persuade Americans to adopt a relation to the rest of the world that would make them less likely to bomb, invade, occupy, or otherwise mistreat the rest of the world, Chomsky has clearly not forgotten. His voice demonstrates the moral power of rising above loyalty to one’s homeland, tearing free of its peculiar cultural assumptions, and looking at it with an alien’s eye. At the same time, however, this is not cosmopolitanism in a pure or absolute sense. (Here my argument makes a turn.) It is not a view from nowhere. True, Chomsky blames the United States as if he did not belong in any way to the United States, and as if his readers didn’t either. When we Americans read Chomsky, we feel at least momentarily as if we ourselves were extraterrestrials, looking down on the misconduct of others. It’s not our misconduct; we’re from another solar system. Reading him is pleasurable the way certain works of science fiction are. We are visitors from another world, taking in the bizarre customs. We are confident at every instant that they are not our customs. Yet on second thought it is strange that we are so confident, because if we are Americans, they are our customs, at least in a sense of “our” that remains to be specified.

Chomsky’s practice of comparison tries hard to escape the constraint of national belonging. But that constraint reasserts itself, so to speak, negatively. The United States is
criticized in almost all of Chomsky’s comparisons. But that makes it the one fixed point of those comparisons. In other words, Chomsky puts the United States at the center of virtually all his judgments. It occupies a negative, devalued, non-honorific center, but a center nonetheless. This means that other things are, as the saying goes, marginalized or excluded. The one consistent principle that is followed in his commentaries is that what the United States has done or is doing is wrong. No other principle gets more than the briefest recognition. Though Chomsky sounds like a universalist, his practice of national self-blaming is not in fact universalistic, therefore, unless you are ready to count the presumptive guilt of the United States in every case under discussion as an example of universalism. Chomsky will compare an action by the US—say, the claim to “humanitarian intervention” in the 1990s— with an action by another nation—say, the interventions of India in Bangladesh in 1971 or of Vietnam in Cambodia in 1978. He will ask, quite rightly, why the latter did not get described by the so-called international community as humanitarian interventions, though each might be said to have stopped a genocide. But Chomsky does not stop and ask whether the actions of the Indian and Vietnamese governments were actually worthy of approval or not. What were their motives? Were they acting in a more disinterested way than the United States? Does he approve the principle that intervention is acceptable if it does stop a genocide? If so, he might be obliged to praise the US if and when (perhaps in the former Yugoslavia) it could be established that it did just that. But if not, then he would be obliged to be critical of the Indian and Vietnamese governments and their excuses for intervention. It would seem that he backs off from such criticisms on the grounds that he is not himself Indian or Vietnamese. In other words, here we seem to be in the presence of a double standard based on national identity or location— not
universalism at all, but nationalism in reverse.\footnote{9}

As someone committed to universal rational principles and the rhetoric of the Golden Rule, Chomsky might be expected to reject any hint of a double standard. The fact that he doesn’t do so, that he is so reluctant to consider, say, the opinion of an Indian citizen about the Indian government, or the opinion of a Vietnamese citizen about the Vietnamese government, or for that matter the opinion of a \textit{Cambodian} citizen who was perhaps saved by the intervention of the Vietnamese government (you see how this could go on)—the fact that no perspectives matter except perspectives about America, as long as they are wholly critical, is the negative sign of a concealed, disavowed Americanness.\footnote{10} It indicates that Chomsky’s cosmopolitanism is not after all extraterrestrial, but very American.

\textbf{What difference does it make if we recognize that Chomsky’s cosmopolitanism is, in its way, an imperfect, local, Americano-centric cosmopolitanism?} My own view, briefly stated, is that there are plenty of things for which one can properly condemn Chomsky, but one can’t condemn him simply for being a partial or imperfect cosmopolitan. Partial, imperfect cosmopolitans are the \textit{only} cosmopolitans. A full, absolute, genuinely extraterrestrial cosmopolitanism doesn’t exist. \textit{There is no cosmopolitanism without some degree or mode of belonging, even if that belonging takes the negative form of shame rather than the positive form of pride. All cosmopolitanism is really “local” or “rooted” or “discrepant,” “patriotic” or “vernacular” or “actually existing.” Therefore all cosmopolitanism is more or less paradoxical. The question is, what follows?}\footnote{11} What is the next step? If there is no clean escape from the cosmopolitan paradox, are there at least significantly different ways of inhabiting it?

In moving toward an answer to this question, it needs to be said first of all that
Chomsky’s negative but intensely possessive mode of belonging to America has certain political disadvantages. One disadvantage is that it makes the rest of the American Left disappear. It’s as if he were saying: there can be only one alien, and that alien is me. Michael Berube has described this heroically self-isolating pose in a Melvillean phrase: “I only am escaped from America to tell thee.” This pose is not helpful, for example, for those interested in encouraging solidarity or building movements. A further and related disadvantage is the series of lapses of political judgment and instances of badly misplaced solidarity into which Chomsky’s anti-Americanism has led him. One famous example is his defense of Pol Pot. When the official American discourse was calling Pol Pot a mass murderer, Chomsky compared the Khmer Rouge with the French Resistance to the Nazis. (It’s this that he’s trying to conceal, I think, with his faint praise of the Vietnamese intervention to stop the Cambodian genocide—he himself was very late in recognizing that a genocide had happened.) Another example is his de facto denial of the Serbian ethnic cleansing of Bosnia and Kosovo and his opposition to any supranational intervention to stop it. Milosevic may have been a thug, but so was the US. What could possibly legitimize the intervention of one thug against another? It’s a fair question, but not an unanswerable one. The answer is: when one of them is at the moment in the act of committing genocide. Attacking Milosevic’s attackers at that moment had the practical effect of defending both Milosevic and genocide.

Chomsky’s objection could have been raised against efforts to save the Jews of Europe from the Nazis, had the Allies made any such efforts. After all, the Allies were not saints, were they? This objection could also have been raised against United Nations efforts to stop the Rwandan genocide, had the Clinton administration permitted the United Nations to act or even to
use the G-word. Political action is rarely carried out by the saintly. There is something both irresponsible and extraterrestrial, therefore, about Chomsky’s suggestion that he has decided the issue when he declares to all that the United States is a sinner, and at least as great a sinner as any other nation. What the US government thinks or does can’t be enough to decide anyone’s political judgments or solidarities, whether positively or negatively. This point also applies to those occasions when anyone is tempted to assert that colonialism necessarily remains the sole or prime causal factor in each and every instance of human suffering and injustice in the former colonies. It is possible to recognize the living legacy of colonialism without being quite so provincial, so negatively narcissistic about “the West.” Negative narcissism is still narcissism.

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The moral to be drawn here might appear to be: do as Chomsky says, not what he does. Apply the same standards to every nation, whether the US happens to like or hate that nation. On second thought, however, it seems possible that this not the proper moral after all. Do we believe it is in fact right to apply standards equally to all? The question arises in Walter Benn Michaels’ book The Trouble With Diversity. It is strange to note that though their political purposes could not be more opposed, Michaels in fact adopts a rhetoric of comparison that closely resembles Chomsky’s.

In his brief against identity politics, Michaels rather cleverly compares American political theorist Samuel Huntington with the Aymara Indians of Bolivia. The demand of indigenous peoples that their endangered cultures be protected from the assimilatory pressures of modernization, Michaels says, is precisely the same demand that Huntington makes when he opposes the cultural and linguistic influence of Hispanic immigrants in order to preserve and
defend a distinct American, Anglophone identity. The comparison seems perfect: “What Huntington wants for Americans is what . . . the Aymara Indians want for themselves: to preserve their (and our) identities” (148-49). Here Michaels applies precisely the same standard to the United States as to the Aymara Indians. I have no problem with embarrassing Huntington by comparing his own cultural conservatism to the identity politics he despises. Why then do I feel that this rhetoric is less egalitarian than it seems?

The reason for unease becomes clearer when Michaels follows his argument up and away into the imaginative (and equally Chomskyean) domain of the counterfactual— a flight of imagination that is demanded, of course, by the Golden Rule itself. Let us “imagine ourselves,” Michaels tells his fellow Americans, “on the losing side of globalization. Imagine the United States fifty years from now— we’re so poor that China and India are outsourcing production to the desperate and hence very hard-working masses of Michigan and Ohio” (162). This fantasy turns into an argument against Americans hanging on to English: “If we don’t learn Hindi, we won’t even be able to get the call center jobs that would keep us out of the sweatshops, where all our friends who just speak English work twelve hours a day making athletic shoes to be worn by Asians . . . So when the United States is going to become the place jobs are outsourced to, I want to be able to speak Hindi or at least make sure that my children do. In a world where economic opportunity depends on the ability to speak Hindi, why would I want them to keep on speaking English?” (164-165).

Michaels calls this the “final twist,” but it is not where the argument actually ends up. As the counterfactual fades and we return to the world where Americans are on the winning rather than the losing side of globalization and where English is not threatened with imminent
extinction, the point of the argument once again becomes the irrationality of globalization’s losers, who really are faced with the loss of their language and culture and who insist, against the manifest imperative of “economic opportunity,” on wanting to preserve both. All of this *jeu d’esprit* comes back to the aim of discrediting the Aymara Indians. And the discrediting is accomplished by none other than Chomsky’s Golden Rule. Look, Michaels says, I’m applying the same standard to myself that I apply to others. *I* am willing to give up my language in exchange for further economic opportunity. So why shouldn’t *they*? As a reward for my magnanimity, I win the right to say that the Third World in general and indigenous peoples in particular must accept whatever deal global capital offers them, even if it means surrendering their languages and cultures. That’s what I would do if I were in their place. You’ve just seen me put myself in their place.

The problem here is not whether the standard is applied equally and reciprocally. The problem is the standard itself. Whose standard is it? For Michaels, the standard appears to be: successful adaptation to global capitalism. This standard assumes an American self that travels light, always remaining itself no matter what it has to jettison. This makes a certain sense (less than Michaels assumes, but that isn’t the point here) from the perspective of those who have gotten a relatively good deal from global capitalism. It makes much less sense if, as for the Aymara, jettisoning things like culture and language means that one would no longer be oneself. It’s not that economic well-being is irrelevant to the Aymara. On the contrary. No moderately interested observer of indigenous struggles to preserve their languages and cultures could miss the fact that language and culture are not merely tokens of identity to be preserved for their own sake; they are also means to an economic end. In the nations and situations where peoples like

Comment [r10]: Second statement of same point seems superfluous. I DISAGREE
the Aymara live, securing the right to practice one’s language and culture belongs to the larger economic and political enterprise, the effort to seize control over lands, territories, and resources that are at present controlled or severely threatened by foreigners, including multinational corporations. Michaels’s solution for the Aymara and other indigenous peoples, conveyed by the call-center analogy, is to submit to the multinationals, exchanging their native languages for “economic opportunity.” He does not seem capable of imagining that one might actually contest the claims of the multinationals rather than submitting to them. Nor does he notice that preserving native languages might be a strategy for contesting those claims.

The results of the comparison will of course depend on the standard applied. Michaels’s standard of successful adaptation to global capitalism, along with the streamlined self it implies, manifestly pushes the comparison in a different direction than it might have gone had the standard been, say, “economic well-being.” The latter might conceivably be embraced by the Aymara themselves. The former probably would not. If the standard of comparison demands a free, pre-social individual, imagined to remain itself no matter how much of its cultural and linguistic baggage it throws overboard, then the Aymara are clearly placed at a disadvantage from the outset. Applying that standard allows North Americans who are willing to give up their language to look better and ensures that the Aymara will look worse. Michaels is perfectly willing to apply the same standard to himself that he applies to the Aymara. But it’s his standard, not theirs, and thus the comparison plays to his advantage. The same point might be made about Chomsky’s Golden Rule. He wants the same standards applied to U.S. citizens that we apply to others. But he has no means of objecting to standards as long as they are applied to us as well, even if the standards themselves favor us, thus winning comparative advantage for us
if and when we do apply them both to ourselves and to others.

The reader may already have been speculating about one inequality buried within Chomsky’s version of the Golden Rule: the inequality of power between the parties compared. (Indeed, it is that inequality, provisionally removed by means of Michaels’s counterfactual, that proves decisive once it is brought back in.) But this inequality seems to work in Chomsky’s defense. If he has deviated from true universality by always putting the US at the center, it might be argued that the US belongs at the center, precisely because it has so much power. The US is, after all, not merely a power but a superpower, and as such it tilts the playing field between nations in its own favor. You cannot judge a small, relatively powerless country by the same standards. Chomsky’s practice, which deviates from his Golden Rule, is ethically superior to the Golden Rule. This comes very close to what Chomsky himself argues when accused of falling away from a universal standard, though he presents his position in terms of another moral universal. “The most elementary moral principles,” he writes, “would lead to ‘playing up’ the crimes of domestic origin in comparison to those of official enemies, that is, ‘playing up’ the crimes that one can do something about.”16 Principles are relative to responsibility, which is itself relative to proximity. We have more responsibility to criticize that misconduct which lies closest to hand, which we are most causally involved in and/or which we can most easily have an effect on. In this sense pure universalism would be a moral and political error. Comparisons must, after all, be selective.17 As Chomsky says, this does seem to be an elementary moral principle. It was the indispensable response, for example, during the recent massacre of civilians in Gaza when Zionists demanded that American critics of Israel spend equal time criticizing Hamas. No doubt
Hamas had things to answer for. But we Americans, and especially we American Jews, were ethically obliged to spend greater critical energy on the evils supported by our government and committed in our name.

Still, there is an issue here, that of the relation between cosmopolitanism and power. Chomsky’s version of the Golden Rule—“the standards we apply to others we must apply to ourselves”-- is so successfully cosmopolitan because it does not seem to represent any one nation at the expense of any other, and thus seems to rise above the power alignments and power imbalances that otherwise structure the world of nations. As we have seen, however, it never completely separates itself from power; even Chomsky’s self-defense (the need to “play up” the crimes of one’s own nation) assumes a greater power to affect the crimes of one’s own nation. It assumes, in other words, that the American cosmopolitan possesses a certain power. This point could be made cynically: look, one might say, even the rhetorical figure of the extraterrestrial assumes a degree of power that needs to be spelled out. Like Spielberg’s E.T., who could make bicycles fly and perform other neat tricks, Chomsky’s extraterrestrial would also have to possess superhuman powers merely in order to have arrived on earth in the first place. Those powers may go unmentioned, but they must be part of what the figure actually means to us. One might argue that in this respect, too, the alien is secretly American. But the point is not merely that Chomsky should confess to the powers he secretly possesses by virtue of being an American citizen. That could be said, and most often is said, as if the only proper position were to be powerless. It’s that position, a position that I associate rightly or wrongly with his anarchism and with the more pervasive anti-statism of our historical moment, that I’m arguing against here.

I illustrate from the 2007 book *On Suicide Bombing* by the anthropologist Talal Asad.
Asad notes that so-called “legitimate violence exercised in and by the modern progressive state—including the liberal democratic state—possesses a peculiar character that is absent in terrorist violence (absent not because of the latter’s virtue but because of the former’s capability)” (3). The usual criteria of virtue have been suspended here and replaced by criteria of capability. It’s not that terrorist violence is virtuous; it’s merely that it has less capability to harm than the violence of the state. True enough. Yet the implication here seems to be that the lack of the capability to harm becomes, if not virtue itself, then a new functional substitute for virtue, the basis for a new ethics. This new ethics is anti-normative because it is assumed that ethical norms have been put in place by the powerful, those who do have the capability to harm. It is anti-cosmopolitan because the perception that your very survival is threatened—the ultimate degree of powerlessness—justifies, following the logic of Carl Schmitt, an absolute embrace of your nation in defiance of all cosmopolitan universals. And, by the same token, it dispenses you from making moral judgments.

Chomsky specializes in making moral judgments, of course, yet there is a striking overlap between Chomsky and Asad nonetheless. They share a kind of extraterrestriality—an internationalism of the putatively powerless. I elaborate on this point in my conclusion.

Though Chomsky is best known in the humanities as a Golden Rule universalist, whether because of his belief in a biologically-based human nature or his famous 1971 debate with Michel Foucault, he often insists on the contamination of supposedly universal standards by unequal power. He has been extremely critical of the selectivity of human rights—so much so as to be taken by some as a simple opponent of human rights. In Hegemony or Survival, ethical norms are presented as merely the random ideology of the latest crop of thugs. In the
debate with Foucault, similarly, Chomsky notes that “international law is, in many respects, the instrument of the powerful; it is a creation of states and their representatives . . . It’s simply an instrument of the powerful to retain their power” (48). Then he adds, however, that “international law is not solely of that kind. And in fact there are interesting elements of international law, for example, embedded in the Nuremburg principles and the United Nations Charter, which permit, in fact, I believe, require the citizen to act against his own state in ways which the state will falsely regard as criminal” (48-49). His impulse is to suggest that while much international law, like all domestic law, is a creation of the state, some international law is not, and it’s the part of the law that is not produced by the state that’s valid. Here we see Chomsky’s anarchism, his assumption that whatever is created by states is invalid and must be resisted. (The epigraph to Chomsky’s For Reasons of State is from Bakunin: “The State is the organized authority, domination, and power of the possessing classes over the masses.”) It is this anarchist assumption that seems to underlie his rhetorical opportunism about humanitarian intervention to stop genocide 22 He cannot come out and say that what the governments of Vietnam and India did to stop genocide should indeed count as humanitarian intervention, because to admit this would be to endorse the action of a state. States are always bad guys, except perhaps when they are in the act of resisting the US. 23

Yet the state is precisely what Chomsky does partially endorse— that he can’t keep himself from endorsing, I want to say— when he talks about the law. When he’s talking about law in general, it’s clear that domestic law too has ethical validity in his eyes: “to a very large extent existing law represents certain human values, which are decent human values: and existing law, correctly interpreted, permits much of what the state commands you not to do”
The same is of course also true about the parts of international law that he likes: they too are largely if not entirely produced by “states and their representatives” (47). Chomsky cannot sustain his anarchism if he is also going to be a cosmopolitan; he cannot be a cosmopolitan without the state, and the state’s power. That power is also his power. Let me put this another way. Here Chomsky is accepting implicitly a series of principles that he absolutely refuses to accept explicitly. First, the principle that cosmopolitan standards he considers valid are produced in part by the power of states, whose authority he rejects. Second, and by extension, the principle that the cosmopolitan standards he considers valid are invested in part with the power of states. Third and more simply, the principle that cosmopolitanism is invested with power. Finally and most simply, the principle that having power is a good thing – a good thing for cosmopolitanism, and a good thing for anyone who wants not just to interpret the world, but to change it.

These principles flesh out Chomsky’s self-defense against the charge of selectivity in his comparisons. The states we inhabit are agents over which we can have a certain leverage. In that sense they are proper objects of selective or disproportionate criticism. But they do not merely deserve unequal treatment because they are near at hand, causes of an evil for which we are responsible. This criticism is also merited because they are agents on which we can have an effect. As an anarchist, Chomsky may only want to say that the state can be resisted. But once he opens the door to the possibility of successful resistance, he can’t block the possibility of pushing the state to do things he believes in, as it has already done in passing the laws of which he expressly approves. Indeed, he cannot consistently deny that the state has already done things he would have liked it to do. That might mean desegregating the Alabama schools (in Alabama
in the 1950s and 1960s, the local meant racism, and the federal government was fighting racism). Or it might mean stopping a genocide, as Chomsky almost concedes the Indian and Vietnamese states did.

In a sense, I am only illustrating here the abstract theoretical point already made. All cosmopolitanism is paradoxical or imperfect in the sense that it involves belonging as well as detachment. Cosmopolitanism and belonging to a nation-state are not always and everywhere antithetical to one another. Usable power is, as it were, the good side of the imperfectness of Chomsky’s extraterrestrial detachment, the hidden benefit in a disavowed belonging, a disavowed partiality. The point seems worth insisting on because it undermines Chomsky’s anarchism and because anarchism is such a large if only implicit impulse in contemporary celebrations of a supposedly post-national condition. We cosmopolitan humanists do not like to acknowledge that we belong, in the strong sense, to states, though states, when we push them, do the work of guaranteeing human rights and providing welfare as well as (when we don’t stop them) making war and keeping out unwanted migrants. Anarchists like to think of themselves as free but powerless. They are neither as free as they think, nor as powerless. Power is not something that belongs only to the bad guys; it’s certainly not a way of telling who is a bad guy. A better way of inhabiting the cosmopolitan paradox would involve recognizing that we are invested with a certain power, and that despite the threat it brings to our ideal impartiality, we wouldn’t mind having more of it.24

* * *

I want to conclude by returning to the practice of comparison as seen against a troubling background of unequal power. It is of course true that the scale of power matters. Talal Asad’s
point was made and re-made during the Israeli invasion of Gaza. It is grotesque to assume that a few rockets aimed at Israeli civilians by Hamas, however wrongly, can be properly met with the wholesale slaughter inflicted on the Palestinian inhabitants. Any norm that justifies the latter by equating or “balancing” the two, as mainstream American discourse has repeatedly done, deserves to be treated as worthless. But many of us in the humanities generalize this position (mistakenly, in my view), preferring, like Asad, to place ourselves outside norms, thereby evading the supposed arrogance of “speaking for humanity.”

In a chapter of a forthcoming book, Judith Butler counsels Asad to reject this move. She first makes the Foucaultian point that normativity is indeed interfered with by “the differential of power.” The category of “the human,” she warns, is already normative in a way that tilts the comparison in favor of some and against others. So yes, “speaking for humanity” is a problem. Yet the refusal to do so is also a problem. When Asad offers an anthropological “understanding” of suicide bombing in place of, and as opposed to, any normative judgment, one might say that he presents himself as a sort of extraterrestrial, looking on with complete detachment from the urgencies of judgment that mere humans feel obliged to respond to. By this account scholarship itself would be a cosmopolitan space in the extraterrestrial sense: ethically speaking, it would be a space of perfect non-belonging.

This danger is most acute for anyone who depends on a politics of comparison. One who criticizes another nation typically compares that nation with her own but leaves her own nation out of bounds, safely unscrutinized. It’s this nationalist habit, particularly obnoxious in the United States, that Chomsky so vibrantly exposes and demolishes. He makes the unmarked term visible again. Yet the same thing can happen when one compares two other nations or situations,
and in that case the risk is that the third term, the comparer himself, will become ethically invisible. It’s this risk that I think Butler is revealing to Asad, and her warning seems relevant to Chomsky as well.

In the case of the Khmer Rouge, one of the statements that got Chomsky into trouble was an act of comparison between the outrage expressed in the West against Pol Pot and the relative silence that greeted the simultaneous and extremely bloody Indonesian invasion of East Timor in December 1975, which was backed by the US. “In the case of Cambodia reported atrocities have not only been eagerly seized on by the Western media but also embellished by substantial fabrications,” Chomsky wrote. “The case of Timor is radically different. The media have shown no interest in examining the atrocities of the Indonesian invaders, even though in absolute numbers they are on the same scale” (Rai, 28). Chomsky’s defender Milan Rai comments that the focus in this piece is “on assessing the performance of the media—its handling of the evidence available at the time. The focus is not on judging the situation in Cambodia itself” (28). Rai finds it incomprehensible, then, that Chomsky and his co-writer Edward Herman “were harshly attacked for allegedly doubting the facts of the Khmer Rouge massacres” (29). A critic who accuses Chomsky of saying that the Cambodian “executions have numbered at most in the thousands” is reprimanded by Rai, who goes back to the original article. In that article we read: “such journals as the Far Eastern Economic Review, the London Economist, the Melbourne Journal of Politics, and others elsewhere, have provided analyses by highly qualified specialists who have studied the full range of evidence available, and who concluded that the executions have numbered at most in the thousands” (29-30). Rai concludes: “Chomsky was not presenting his conclusion ‘as based on the analysis of highly qualified specialists themselves’; he was
presenting the conclusions of the specialists themselves, without comment” (30).

To pretend that you can hide behind the authorities you cite is strange for an anarchist, especially one who is so reluctant to attribute authority to experts or specialized knowledge. To hide behind the authorities is like hiding between the two objects of a comparison, such as Cambodia and East Timor: it assumes that the one who is making the comparison is not part of the events that are under analysis, that the speaker citing others need make “no comment” on what is going on. To present the analysis of qualified specialists without rebuttal and without comment is, in effect, to say those words oneself. In this case, it is to radically diminish the Cambodian genocide, even if only in order to prove the existence, in the Western media, of “an appalling double standard regarding Cambodia and East Timor” (31). Ethically speaking, Chomsky makes himself disappear—that is, he claims to be a “hypothetical extraterrestrial observer.”

Butler’s point about Asad is that his extraterrestrial withdrawal from normative judgment is not wrong (there are good reasons to be wary of norms). Rather, it is weaker than it needs to be: “there is a stronger normative position here – a more consequential exploration of normativity– than its author explicitly allows.” She repeats the comparative term “stronger.” She insists that there is no stepping outside the practice of comparison. Asad’s argument that terrorism cannot be considered apart from state violence depends implicitly on “a horizon of comparative judgment,” she says, and when Asad is comparative, he is also normative. He is normative despite his attempted refusal of normativity. This is what gives Asad’s argument “its rhetorical force.” Accepting that he is indeed speaking normatively (presumably even if this entailed making a moral judgment on suicide bombing) would make his argument “stronger.”
I read Butler’s recourse to the vocabulary of force and strength as also, simultaneously, a way of making a theoretical point about power. I take her to be saying that, however reluctantly, Asad is participating in shared norms and thus in the social power that those norms embody. He seems to prefer imagining himself as outside such norms, hence as powerless. But that is not the case, either for him or for Chomsky, nor should it be what he and Chomsky desire. Both are right to condemn state violence. But they wrong to condemn the state as (sole) possessor of power, or—what seems to follow from it—to condemn the possession of power as such. State violence cannot be shielded from comparison with so-called terrorism, as it is by the prevailing discourse. But the comparison between the two, once launched, suggests that power can and must be fought with alternative power. A cosmopolitan theory of power must insist, with Foucault, that power is distributed more widely and unpredictably. Power is never absolute, and one can never reject it absolutely. Cosmopolitanism cannot go about acquiring more power unless it begins by admitting that it already has some power.

As we have established, the landscape of comparison is always distorted from below by differentials of power. Yet that cannot stop us from practicing comparison, and practicing it both so as to expose the hidden normativity of certain comparisons and to find a normativity that will empower our own counter-comparisons. Incomparability and incommensurability, which attempt to escape entirely from norms, cannot determine our goal. The aim, as Butler says, “is not to dispense with normativity, but to insist that normative inquiry take on a critical and comparative form.” This measured embrace of comparison is what will make our cosmopolitan arguments stronger, and our strength more cosmopolitan, at a time when we need both more cosmopolitanism and more strength.
Notes

1. For a nuanced but not unrepresentative version of this argument, see Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). The premise of Melas’s book is that it is paradoxically possible to have “a ground of comparison, but no given basis of equivalence” (xii)—in other words, a mode of comparison that fully respects “incommensurability” (xii).


7. This is cited from Arthur Schlesinger.

8. Why take for granted that like Steven Spielberg’s E.T., an extraterrestrial would be *nice*, that he or she or it would *like* us? If one pays attention to Chomsky’s rhetorical figure—never an easy thing to do with Chomsky’s rhetoric, which seems designed to look innocent, transparent, not like rhetoric at all—this is exactly what Chomsky does take for granted. His extraterrestrial seems *surprised* by human self-destructiveness. Why so surprised? In its intergalactic travels, did the visitor from space encounter only life forms that were naturally peace-loving and ecologically friendly? One wonders whether this visitor has really done any traveling at all. Perhaps, at heart, the extraterrestrial is really rather provincial—indignant but basically friendly American human, equipped with the standard set of humane values, and unusual only in its willingness to apply those values to the mystifications and hypocrisies of America’s official discourse.

9. See below for further discussion of Chomsky’s anarchism, which stops him from seeing the value in state action of any sort.

10. As an astute graduate student at Wayne State University noticed during an earlier version of this paper, Chomsky’s rational-comparative view of justice does not demand any response from the subjectivity or opinions of others. This avoids the threat to justice that would arise from
recognition of a chaotic swirl of potentially incommensurable subjectivities, but it also closes
down any sense of the public sphere as a site where these subjectivities might nonetheless reach
some degree of agreement. The distinctive authority of Chomsky’s voice comes in part from the
premise that he does not have to stop and listen to anyone. On the Americaness of Chomsky’s
critique, see also Joe Lockard, “Chomsky on 9-11” in Judaism 51:2 (Spring 2002), 249-252.

11 This looser definition presents a more than merely hypothetical danger that soon very little
will be excluded from it – that we will approach the fatal indistinction of the formula “everything
is cosmopolitanism.” If some rough distinctions can’t be drawn both around and within it, then
politically speaking, the term will have been murdered by its success.

12. Note the contradiction between this and Chomsky’s other rhetorical effect, which is to
suggest that we are all aliens. If one reads Chomsky for tone, there is something a little strange
about the “visitor from another planet” rhetoric. Chomsky is indignant, of course, but he is also
bemused, as if he can’t quite believe that people continue doing and saying things that are so
obviously counter to justice and common sense. And he does not seem to worry that we might
disagree with him. It’s as if he imagined himself telling all this to the Martians back home, who
could be counted on to chuckle along with him. And it’s also as if we were guaranteed to react
in the same way as those Martians. Hence the strangeness: on the one hand, there are no
Martians, or none we know of. On the other, the Martians are us.


14. This is of course just what the current crop of dictators never tires of saying. It’s a betrayal
of those struggling against them.

15. Walter Benn Michaels, The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and
Ignore Inequality (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

Press, 1997), 178. See also p 188, where the ethical emphasis falls on “atrocities for which [one]
shares responsibility and knows how to bring to an end, if [one chooses].”

17. Differences of power are also the key to the eloquent critique of comparison in comparative
literature in Rey Chow’s The Age of the World Target. Comparison cannot be the basic ethical
act if, as Chow argues, all comparison presupposes norms of comparison which implicitly favor
one side over the other. Comparison is grounded, “as the etymology of the word suggests, in the
notion of parity – in the possibility of peer-like equality and mutuality among those being
compared” (72-73). Yet the notion that such equal common ground exists in some natural or
unproblematic way has been troubled. Chow’s citation of Foucault’s citation of Lautréamont–
“the fortuitous encounter on an operating table of a sewing machine and an umbrella” (76) –
makes the act of comparison seem at once random and violating, epistemologically
untrustworthy and sneakily aggressive. At the same time, Chow is unwilling to discontinue comparing, and, as I have argued elsewhere, the alternative, self-consciously tentative versions of comparison she offers are probably close to the best practice standard that already exists. Among these alternatives is, in effect, comparison as the study of the uneven distribution of power that keeps comparison from ever assuming the ideal parity on which it depends, and in that sense keeps it from being what it claims to be. Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006). See also Bruce Robbins, “Afterword,” “Remapping Genre,” *PMLA* 122:5 (October 2007), 1644-1651.


19. Compared to Foucault, Chomsky does indeed come off as a stalwart defender of norms. He rejects Foucault’s idea that “the notions of justice or of ‘realization of the human essence’ are only the inventions of our civilization and result from our class system. The concept of justice is thus reduced to a pretext advanced by a class that has or wants to have access to power” (138). Chomsky on the contrary speaks up for “fundamental human rights” (139). If one looks deeper, however, his position is more complicated.

20. For reflections on consistency as a criterion in Chomsky and his “mistake . . . that hypocrisy is the principal evil of our time” (534), see Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Hannah Arendt on Human Rights and the Limits of Exposure, or Why Noam Chomsky is Wrong About Kosovo,” *Social Research* 69:2 (Summer 2002), 505-537.

21. The rule, Chomsky writes, is “that only the most powerful are granted the authority to establish norms of appropriate behavior—for themselves.” The exception (a sarcastic exception) is when this authority is “delegated to reliable clients. Thus, Israel’s crimes are permitted to establish norms: for example, its regular resort to ‘targeted killings’” (24).

22. It is this same assumption that seems to underlie his rhetorical opportunism about humanitarian intervention to stop genocide.

23. An interesting alternative to Chomsky on India and Vietnam would be the practice of comparison in Perry Anderson, who refuses to cite authorities whose political credentials are less than impeccable. Since there are few if any such authorities, Anderson could logically find himself being extremely critical of the movement against the Iraq War in 2002-3 on the grounds that the anti-war movement looked to the United Nations or to Europe, each of them compromised in the extreme, as useful counter-weights to US militarism. Politically speaking, this takes Anderson out of the game, or at any rate forces him into a posture of analytic spectatorship. It’s perhaps worth asking which, Anderson or Chomsky, is the more extraterrestrial.

24. A cosmopolitan theory of power would have to insist that power is not located in one place.
This was Foucault’s point about not having cut off the king’s head in the domain of political theory, and though Foucault is widely thought of as an anti-statist (I’ve said this myself) looking back to the debate between Foucault and Chomsky makes it clear that of the two, it’s Chomsky who is more of an anti-statist, and more mistaken, therefore, in his theory of power. No state has all the power. But the all-important corollary to this is that cosmopolitanism also has power.

25. But there is also large, transnational power in the norms by which Israel’s slaughter of civilians is condemned around the world— in those voices, like Asad’s and like Chomsky’s, that gather around those norms and speak them.


27. Chomsky created a great deal of trouble for himself by making a similar move with regard to the French literature professor Robert Faurisson, who was fired from his position on the grounds that he had denied the existence of the gas chambers. Chomsky signed a petition in his defense and wrote the following: “I have nothing to say here about the work of Robert Faurisson or his critics, of which I know very little, or about the topics they address, concerning which I have no special knowledge” (Barsky, 180).

28. Here one might say it is Chomsky himself who takes the unmarked place of the United States.